



Archived article from the University of North Carolina at Asheville's *Journal of Undergraduate Research*, retrieved from UNC Asheville's NC DOCKS Institutional Repository: <http://libres.uncg.edu/ir/unca/>

## **Undergraduates in Iniquity: Views of the Commons and the Poor in Reports of the Board of Agriculture in Britain**

Chelsea Beresford  
Department of History  
The University of North Carolina at Asheville  
One University Heights  
Asheville, North Carolina 28804 USA

Faculty Adviser: Dr. Tracey Rizzo

### **Abstract**

In late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century in Britain, the Parliamentary Enclosure movement privatized the commons of the open field system. Members of Parliament saw the villagers' right to the commons – unworked pieces of land shared equally - as a crutch for the idle who were too lazy to take on wage labor. Reports to the Board of Agriculture describe an 'unruly independence and slothful behavior' in villagers who supplement their income by gathering from the commons. These reports recommend enclosing the commons, forcing the poor to embrace waged labor, to cure their immorality. This paper argues that the societal views of poverty brought on by the new Protestant Ethic motivated commons enclosure. The enclosure of common land set the stage for the Age of Privatization.

### **1. Body of Paper**

"Idleness is the root of all evil."<sup>1</sup> This quote from an 18<sup>th</sup> century British Agricultural Report exemplified how misinformation can influence policy. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries, the British Parliament privatized lands that had historically been held for public use, a process called Parliamentary Enclosure. The enclosure of these public lands, also called commons, ended a crucial protection for the common people of England. Agricultural land in Britain had been traditionally divided into tilled fields, meadows, and the common, or "waste." Termed the open-field system, this organization of lands had dominated agricultural life since feudal times. Under the open-field system, farmers worked tilled fields and meadows, while the common was left wild and undeveloped. The wasteland or common was the equivalent of a modern wilderness area. It allowed wild animals to live among the native plants and trees, and for the common people to gather these wild plants and animals as needed. Poor villagers with rights to common land could use it to graze their own livestock, collect firing and building materials, and to hunt, fish, or forage for wild food. The term "common rights" detailed this network of resources available to the poor on the common land, which was divided up into ownership shares.<sup>2</sup> The purpose of these shares was to regulate the commons so everyone who needed them could gain the resources necessary for survival. A common was a social safety net for the village. While landowners held the largest shares of any common, it was the poor who benefitted most from the wild lands.

Parliamentary Enclosure systematically seized resources used and confiscated them for the landed elite. The enclosure of these wild common lands in eighteenth and nineteenth century Britain ended the ancient village economy. Enclosing these public lands into private lots set a precedent of favoring private interests over the public good. This transfer of resources and land from the poorest villagers to the landowners was achieved at the cost of villainizing the poor, removing the independence of a social safety net and forcing them into waged labor for survival. It was the Board of Agriculture of Britain who laid the groundwork for enclosure by aggressively petitioning Parliament to privatize common lands. The Board of Agriculture was not a government entity but a private advisory committee, consisting of landowners lobbying for their own best interests. In order to press for

enclosure, the Agricultural Reports methodically degraded the commons and depicted the poor as depraved simpletons clinging to ancient customs. Though the Board declared enclosure beneficial to the kingdom, it was only truly in the interests of a small, wealthy minority. The County Agriculture Reports portrayed the poor as criminal, ultimately decimating the rights and resources of the least fortunate.

The significance of commons enclosure has been hotly debated over the last hundred years. Most prominent in recent scholarship is a discussion of the value of common rights to the cottager. Leigh Shaw-Taylor (2001) and Sarah Birtles (1999) denied enclosure unjustly harmed the poor. Shaw-Taylor asserted that the commons did not present a substantial income to commoners, insisting that laborers already depended on wages before commons enclosure.<sup>3</sup> On the other hand, Birtles argued that the commons represented an extension of parish relief, excusing the poor from any compensation for enclosure.<sup>4</sup> Both J.M. Neeson (1993) and Graham Rogers (1993) studied common right and the negative effects of enclosure on laborers, agreeing that enclosure harmed the poor.<sup>56</sup> Neeson, Rogers, Shaw-Taylor, and Birtles did not always agree, but they all focused on the effects of enclosure on the cottager. Through this narrow lens, enclosure scholars failed to see the role of the Board of Agriculture in the Parliamentary Enclosure process, and missed the use of Agricultural Reports as to discredit the commons and common right.

Though there is a small body of recent scholarship, outside of the discussion of enclosure and the cottager little has been published on Parliamentary Enclosure. Robert Allen (1992) discussed the impact of the Agricultural Revolution on small farmers.<sup>7</sup> Later, S. J. Thompson (2008) drew connections between enclosure and the decline in classical republican values.<sup>8</sup> Thompson's inspiring work analyzed enclosures not as events with clear-cut causes and effects, but as a manifestation of a changing society. Similar to Thompson, Paul Carter (2001) connected the enclosure movement to the increasing cultural value of waged labor in the enclosure movement.<sup>9</sup> Both Thompson and Carter approached enclosure with a wide-angle lens, yet ultimately failed to identify the Board of Agriculture as the agency turning the poor into criminals.

The recent scholarship on commons enclosure stems from the controversial J. L. and Barbara Hammond, who first published *The Village Labourer* in 1911 establishing the orthodox view of commons enclosure. *The Village Labourer* focused on the hardships endured by the peasantry, while also presenting the motivations of landowners who viewed common lands as, "Harmful to the morals and useless to the pockets of the poor."<sup>10</sup> The Hammonds discussed both the incentives and the effects of commons enclosure, setting off a century of contention among scholars, most of whom entirely ignored the role of the Board of Agriculture in enclosing the commons.

With few exceptions, the historiography of commons enclosure addressed the effects of enclosure on laborers. This two-dimensional view of commons enclosure neglected the rapidly changing world, which developed new standards for property and poverty. The Board of Agriculture viewed private property as the fulcrum for agricultural improvement. It was in this dynamic society that the Board of Agriculture lobbied for exclusive property rights at the expense of the medieval safety net, the common.

Created by Parliamentary grant in 1793, the British Board of Agriculture fulfilled its official role to advise the British government on agricultural issues.<sup>11</sup> Arthur Young, a failed agriculturalist but prolific author, became the Secretary of the Board of Agriculture at its inception.<sup>12</sup> Young declared that the more important tasks existed than analyzing the current agricultural state of the kingdom. Instead, Young recommended that the Board focus on, "The cultivation of the immense wastes of the Kingdom."<sup>13</sup> Enclosure of common lands surpassed all other considerations for the Board of Agriculture.

As Secretary, Young pressed the value of the Agricultural Reports, and the specific value of enclosure to the nation's wealth. Young explained, "To ascertain the amount of these deserts, so disgraceful to the richest country in the world, inquiries were set on foot in every district."<sup>14</sup> Young established two goals for the Board of Agriculture: the enclosure of the commons and improvement in the morality of the poor. The connection between these two topics was summarized by Young himself, who remarked, "These forests [commons] are well known to be the nursery and resort of the most idle and profligate of men: here the undergraduates in iniquity commence their career with deer stealing, and here the more finished and hardened robber secrets himself from justice."<sup>15</sup> Young asserted that the commons encouraged and protected thieves and other criminals, a marriage of the common and the criminal.

Not all authors of the Agricultural Reports disdained common rights. Sir Henry Holland, author of the *General View of the Agriculture of Cheshire*, pointed out that common right was the main obstacle to enclosure because, "The occupier has the liberty of turning abroad his geese, and his pigs; or a small cow. This is one of the circumstances which produces opposition to the enclosure of commons and waste lands."<sup>16</sup> Holland, though a proponent of enclosure, realized that the commons provided the poor with valuable resources, regulated through common right. St. J. Priest, author of the Report on Buckinghamshire, also noted the importance of common right to the poor, "The poor – and persons with little capital, derive benefit from commons, by being enabled to keep horses, cows, and sheep."<sup>17</sup> Priest's amendment concerning capital revealed an important consideration; tracts of land large

enough to graze animals required an equally sizable amount of money. The commons provided people with little income, and no capital, an opportunity to subsidize their lives with livestock. This situation led Nathaniel Kent, author of the Report on Norfolk, to confess, "The principle, indeed, the only impediment, which has any weight with me, upon this subject [enclosure], is the encroachment it may occasion upon the rights and privileges of the poor."<sup>18</sup> Members of the Board of Agriculture knew that the poor depended on the commons, and it left some writers uneasy about the theft of rights inherent in commons enclosure.

Though these few authors of Agricultural Reports clearly saw the importance of common right to the people, the Board of Agriculture as a whole saw common rights as an impediment to enclosure, and to the "improvement" of land through privatization. As far as Secretary Young was concerned, common rights were "unexceptionally the most perfect nuisance that ever blasted the improvement of a country."<sup>19</sup> So instead of simply gathering unbiased agricultural knowledge such as soil conditions and farming methods, the Agricultural Reports also forcefully lobbied for enclosure of common lands. Another author of Agricultural Reports, John Boys' joined Young in pressing the importance of commons enclosure. Boys charged, "The waste lands, the neglected woods, and the impoverished commons, are striking evidences of the necessity and importance of inquiries like the present."<sup>20</sup> Sir Ernest Clarke, who wrote an early history of the Board of Agriculture, noted that "great exertions were made by the Board to bring about the General Enclosure and cultivation of the waste lands of the kingdom."<sup>21</sup> Clarke highlighted the desire for a General Enclosure Bill among the Board's members. The county Agricultural Reports summarized the state of agriculture and agricultural society, but also justified enclosure of the commons despite its costs.

Though the Board of Agriculture influenced the flood of enclosure acts flowing through Parliament, they continually failed to accomplish their ultimate goal, a General Enclosure Bill. Since the enclosure of every common required its own bill in Parliament, the legal costs of enclosure potentially outweighed the financial benefits to landowners. Enclosing lands individually required the support of a majority of stakeholders and was often difficult to obtain. John Billingsley, author of several Agricultural Reports, complained that Parliamentary Enclosures "obtained by the petition of a certain proportion of the commoners, both in number and value, whereby a minority, sanctioned only by ignorance, prejudice, or selfishness, is precluded from defeating the ends of private advantage and public utility."<sup>22</sup> As Billingsley pointed out, Parliamentary Enclosures demanded the agreement of a majority of the shareholders in a common. Shares of a common were not divided equally; larger landowners held more shares in a common, while the poor who actually used common rights owned fewer shares. This division of common right ensured that the poor remained a minority whose vote on enclosure rarely influenced the outcome.

The Board of Agriculture put forward a General Enclosure Bill several times in order to expedite the enclosure process.<sup>23</sup> To the embarrassment of members of the Board, their bills for general enclosure were rejected by Parliament every time. Some members of the Board of Agriculture believed a General Enclosure Bill was required for agricultural improvement. Adam Murray, author of the Report on Warwick, hoped for a General Enclosure Bill in order to make lands more productive, "A General Act of Enclosure can alone effect the enclosing of the small commons and wastes; and until that shall take place, they must remain in their present miserable and unproductive state."<sup>24</sup> For Murray, land left uncultivated was wasteful to the point of being uncivilized, while private property paved the path to civilization.

Other writers for the Board of Agriculture argued that a General Enclosure Bill was a humanitarian interest. Kent appealed for Parliament to act in the greater good of the kingdom, almost proselytizing that "Such an act, and such a plan, would be the greatest blessing England ever met with, and by such a General Act for Inclosing and dividing the commons and commonable lands, at small expense, Parliament would do more for agriculture and population, than ever was done before."<sup>25</sup> Kent's line of reasoning appealed to Parliament to serve the greater good, by placing common lands under private control. Young tried to appeal on behalf of the poor, though rather unsuccessfully; waste lands, reasoned Young, could "be made profitable to the community; could some method, such, for instance, as passing a General Act of Parliament be passed."<sup>26</sup> The problem with Young's entreaty for enclosure on behalf of the poor is that the poor already held access to the common, and enclosure rescinded this right.

The positive appeals for a General Enclosure Bill based on a spirit of improvement and altruism failed to persuade some Parliament, but the rejection of the General Enclosure Bill did not relieve the board of its goal. Richard Parkinson mourned the lack of the bill and the failure of the Board of Agriculture to meet its goals, "I cannot but express my sorrow, that an Act of Parliament for that desirable purpose is so very expensive; and it is much to be lamented, that the exertions of the present worthy president and the Honorable Board of Agriculture, have not been crowned with that success so much merited."<sup>27</sup> Parkinson's lamentation over the lack of a General Enclosure Bill reflected the Board's deep-seated interest in enclosing commons and putting the wastelands into cultivation.

The records of the Parliamentary Debates indicate why the Board of Agriculture's efforts for a General Enclosure Bill failed. John Walter, the Member of Parliament for Berkshire, defended the value of common rights to the poor as late as 1834. Walter declared that enclosure presented an "injustice which would be done to the poor."<sup>28</sup> Though

the House of Commons passed many bills for enclosure of individual common lands, streamlining the process of Parliamentary Enclosure presented a greater threat to the poor, a threat that a majority in Parliament refused to condone.

The legal and monetary obstacles to enclosure, while saving many commons for public use, also embarrassed the Board of Agriculture. While Parkinson bemoaned the perceived legislative slight, Boys took a more militant approach, announcing, "The total destruction of all commonable rights, by a General Act of Parliament for enclosure, would be an object, in my opinion, of the greatest magnitude to the interests of this kingdom."<sup>29</sup> For Boys, the mission was not simply enclosure, but the end of all common rights that reduced the amount of available private property.

The Board of Agriculture declared commons enclosure their primary goal, and there were important social motivations behind the race for enclosure. Written by landowners, Agricultural Reports naturally considered the commons from an aristocratic perspective. Since the lord of the manor derived little benefit from the wild lands, the common was often referred to by the more feudal term 'the lord's waste.'<sup>30</sup> Landowners, particularly the elite landowners on the Board of Agriculture, had difficulty seeing the value of uncultivated lands when they added so little to their pockets. John Holt's report on the County of Lancaster questioned, "Why seek out distant countries to cultivate, whilst so much remains to be done at home?"<sup>31</sup> For Holt, these uncultivated lands held no value, and Young shared his concern. In his report on the County of Sussex, Young made a similar observation, "It is not a little curious, that such immense tracts of land should be left in a desert state."<sup>32</sup> Like Holt, Young questioned the value of leaving land uncultivated, regardless of the fact that these lands were in use everyday by commoners. Similarly, Board member John Middleton's survey of Middlesex remarked, "In Britain, though a country celebrated for enterprise and industry, we have upwards of twenty-two million acres of land called commons, which are, for the most part, absolute nuisances."<sup>33</sup> Middleton used his Report not only as an account of the common lands of Middlesex, but also to assert his aristocratic opinion that the commons were useless.

The authors of Agricultural Reports intentionally focused on one important outcome of enclosure - profit. The profit motive was one of the factors expressed most often in Agricultural Reports. Holt suggested, "The commons, or uncultivated lands, which heretofore have not yielded profit either to the proprietor or public; have increased in their value from – nothing, if starving a few geese, lean kine, producing weeds, heath, etc., can, with propriety be called nothing."<sup>34</sup> Instead of an unenclosed common land that supported foraging and free-range geese for the poor, Holt offered the prospect of creating more profitable private property. Later in his Report, Holt reiterated his statement that wastes are misused lands, but this time presenting the commons as overused rather than barren, "at present, being over-flocked, the cattle starved, [is] of little advantage to the owners."<sup>35</sup> Once again, Holt undervalued any advantages of common right to the poor in favor of a profit motive for landowners, implying that the benefits to the rich outweighed any advantages to the poor.

The Agricultural Reports even contained information on increased rents as a benefit of enclosing common lands. William Pitt's Report on Northampton claimed that rents are higher on enclosed lands. As enclosed commons were not subject to religious tithes, there were several sources of profit from enclosure.<sup>36</sup> Priest revealed information on rents in his Report on Buckinghamshire. "In general," surmised Priest, "enclosing has more than doubled the rents" in areas with enclosed commons.<sup>37</sup> Further, Young's Report on Oxfordshire reported, "Fringford [common] has been improved greatly in rent and produce since enclosure, at least trebled in both."<sup>38</sup> These selected examples from the Agricultural Reports are not unique; most County Reports contained at least some information on the increased rents from commons enclosure. Since each writer for the Board of Agriculture included information on increased rents, a situation that would benefit the landowner but not the renter, it can be concluded that the profit motive was strong for the landowning elite in an increasingly monetary society.

The members of the Board of Agriculture were not entirely deaf to the arguments against enclosure. Enclosure increased the poor-rates (a type of tax levied for the care of paupers) throughout the parish. Young confessed, "in proportion to the number of enclosures, the poor's-rates are increased."<sup>39</sup> Here, Young concedes that as land was enclosed, the poor were less able to care for themselves, requiring an increase in taxes. Pitt, who often argued for enclosure because of the financial benefits to landowners, declared, "I think many of the arguments that have been advanced against enclosure are futile and weak; they have been charged with throwing the laboring poor out of employ, and diminishing populations."<sup>40</sup> Though Young willingly admitted the connection between enclosure and the poor-rates, for the Board of Agriculture, the promise of wealth to landowners outweighed the demise of a class of people who had historically lived off the land.

Outside of the profit motive of increased rents, enclosure also benefitted landowners by lowering wages. As the commons existed as a safety net of resources for the poor, its resources gave workers some power in negotiating labor agreements. Before enclosure, the poor could use the commons as a bargaining chip to demand better working

conditions. Without the commons, the rural working poor were left at the mercy of an employer. William Mavor verified this in his *General View of the Agriculture of Berkshire*:

In some situations, where there are extensive wastes, a cow, and occasionally a few sheep, may be kept by the poor; but I have seldom seen that this materially increased their comforts, while it had a natural tendency to render them idle, and to give them ideas of a visionary independence, incompatible with the duties of their station.<sup>41</sup>

Mavor's analysis of common right revealed his contempt for the poor. In claiming that common right made workers idle, independent, and unfit for their station, Mavor implied that self-sustenance and independence should be reserved for the wealthy. In the industrializing era, independence was incompatible with labor. Billingsley, though not as blatant as Mavor, sympathized with the desire to force the poor into waged labor. Billingsley comforted landowners with the promise of "a new and extensive force of labor of the most productive kind."<sup>42</sup> Just as the commons gave power to workers, enclosure of the common lands shifted the power to the employer. No longer could rural workers demand higher wages or better working conditions without the fear of destitution.

The power politics involved in enclosure revealed an important incentive to increase poverty in Britain. Poverty, while holding no advantages for the bereft, retained benefits to landowners and capitalists. It was in the best interest of employers to keep workers dependent on their labor, and to remove resources that created independence. Billingsley, for one, made clear his belief that workers had to be kept in their place. "Great exertion and excess of wages are forerunners to drunkenness and debauchery," concluding that, "Where daily labour prevails, a considerable portion of the day is wasted in sauntering, holding tales, and in a sluggish use of the limbs which are capable of more lively motion."<sup>43</sup> According to Billingsley, high wages lead to drunkenness, and left to their own devices, workers would waste employers' time and money. Young agreed with Billingsley, asserting that high wages destroyed morals just as much as the common lands did; "the workers get drunk; work not above four days out of six; dissipate their money, hurt their constitutions, [and] contract indolent and vicious dispositions."<sup>44</sup> Young's statement is similar to Mavor's longing for the days of feudalism. Idleness, indolence, and a vicious disposition were a direct consequence of the poor having access to too many resources. In his Report on Hertfordshire, Young repeated his sentiments on high wages. Landowners disparaged any benefit to the poor, whether commons or high wages; Young related, "The farmers complain of it, as doing mischief, for it makes the poor saucy."<sup>45</sup> A "saucy" workforce could be avoided if workers are kept indigent. Young connected enclosure to a more docile working class in his Report on Sussex, "low rents do not always generate exertion and activity." In a footnote attached to this remark in the original text, William Dann gloried, "I am glad to find this idea in the minds of so many of the reporters."<sup>46</sup> Young and Dann revealed another benefit of higher rents; they produce more exertion from workers. Dann's comment revels in the idea that taking resources from workers and raising their rents produced a more "effective" workforce. As if to drive the point home, Young insisted that, "What the sober and provident do voluntarily, the idle and dissolute ought to be compelled to do."<sup>47</sup> An effective workforce, in this case, meant an impoverished and desperate workforce.

Instead of allowing villagers to use the commons, authors of the Agricultural Reports preferred that they meet their basic needs by taking on waged labor. Depriving the poorest villagers of their common rights would force them to work for landowners in the village as day laborers, entirely dependent on wages and demand rather than on their own craft and skill. Members of the Board of Agriculture sought to replace dependence on the common with dependence on waged labor. Kent, proclaimed, "These mistaken people place a fallacious dependence upon these precarious commons, and do not trust to the returns of regular labour, which would be, by far, a better support to them."<sup>48</sup> Kent assumed that waged labor is more inherently valuable than self-sustenance, again revealing the purely aristocratic perspective of the Board of Agriculture. John Clark brought Kent's assumption to a new level in his Report on the County of Radnor. Clark complained, "The commons are in their present state hurtful to the community at large... They prevent the private property from being cultivated, by holding forth to the inhabitants the means of subsisting without labour."<sup>49</sup> Clark speculated that the poor must be forced to work for wages in order for the commons to be cultivated. The Board of Agriculture, along with advocating for enclosure of the commons, also lobbied to provide rural landowners with a workforce dependent on waged labor.

The destruction of common rights occupied a central position in the Board of Agriculture's contest to enclose the commons and shift laborers to waged employment. Common rights detailed who could use the commons and regulated the use of common lands. Everyone who used a common had common rights, which delayed enclosure because commoners naturally hesitated to relinquish their rights and their resources. In Young's Report on Lincolnshire, he noted that, "Had it not been for common-rights, all England would long ago have been cultivated and improved."<sup>50</sup> In many of the Agricultural Reports, when not discussing common rights, writers insisted that the

commons were overstocked, leading to the starvation of animals stocked on the common. Ironically, when discussing common rights, authors of Agricultural Reports tended to claim that the commons were empty, using whatever data was most convenient. Gooch's Report on Cambridge mentioned, "I counted but seven cows and a couple of asses on it [the common]; the other poor are too indigent to use their rights."<sup>51</sup> Far from overstocked, Gooch claimed the commons were desolate. Further, Gooch claimed that common right was useless to the poor because they did not take advantage of their rights. Report author Middleton opposed common rights when he assumed, "Under the idle pretense of securing a few wretched common rights, the law operates, in the most effectual manner, to perpetuate the most ruinous consequences."<sup>52</sup>

Agricultural Reports advanced the theory that the commons promoted idleness. John Clark's survey of Radnor included an example of how the commons led people into idleness, "Here rests the root of the whole evil; and here too these destructive resources of indolence, which by furnishing him with the means of a scanty subsistence in the mean time, enables him to slumber on."<sup>53</sup> To the landowning class, the commons represented not a benefit to the poor, but a liability. Middleton maintained that the commons "inculcates a desire to live, from that time forward, without labour, or at least with as little as possible."<sup>54</sup> This was a liability for landowners, as workers with access to the common could not be compelled to work. Billingsley illustrated why common right and the commons produced idleness in his Report on Somerset, "Day-labour becomes disgusting; the aversion increases by indulgence; and at length the sale of a half-fed calf, or hog, furnishes the means of adding intemperance to idleness."<sup>55</sup> Billingsley suggested that Britain could never be industrialized if commoners were not compelled to work. He did offer a solution to advance industrialization, hypothesizing that enclosure "would train up a rising generation to care and industry, instead of theft and idleness."<sup>56</sup> By enclosing the commons, abolishing the safety net, the poor would be forced to seek out waged labor under the supervision of their employer. The Board of Agriculture equated waged labor with morality.

The Board of Agriculture used their Agricultural Reports as propaganda to privatize common lands. This goal required villainization of both the commons and the poor dependent on common right. A widespread approach to villainizing the commons in these Agricultural Reports rested on portraying the common lands as dangerous. Young described the commons as "filled with poachers, deer-stealers, thieves, and pilferers of every kind: offences of almost every description abound so much, that the offenders are a terror to all quiet and well-disposed persons."<sup>57</sup> Young's description of the commons resembled a prison more than a simple uncultivated tract of land. Further, he portrayed the commons as a terror to the simple, law-abiding villages. Mavor used a similar tactic in his Report on Berkshire, agreeing that the commons encouraged "pilfering, poaching, and other vicious or idle habits."<sup>58</sup> Though less fearsome than Young's rhetoric, Mavor focused on the criminal activities available on the common. Additionally, Middleton insisted that the "commons of this country are nurseries for thieves."<sup>59</sup> Unlike the cultivated lands surrounding the village, where the "good" people grew up, Middleton attributed the origin of criminality to the common. It was in this wild tract of land, according to the writers of Agricultural Reports, that criminality took root.

Not only were the commons portrayed as a dangerous den of thieves, but writers of the Agricultural Reports presented the commons as a source of moral corruption for society at large. Assuming that people with common right would be reluctant to work, Holland attacked the commons on the grounds that the commons and common right extinguished the motivation for industry and morality. "The facility of being maintained destroys every stimulant to exertion;" challenged Holland, "and honesty having no advantage, the rogue laughs at the honest man. Debauchery, drunkenness, petty thefts, and perjury, are increasing with rapid strides."<sup>60</sup> In contrast to the perceived "morality" of day labor, the commons were described as leading directly to criminal behavior. Another moral ramification of the commons was proposed by Billingsley, who asserted, "Moral effects of an injurious tendency accrue to the cottager, from a reliance on the imaginary benefits of stocking a common."<sup>61</sup> In an effort to discredit the commons and common right, the Board of Agriculture insisted that the commons disrupted the morality of the poor.

The quest to villainize the commons did not end with merely arguing that common right disrupted the morals of the poor. The Agricultural Reports went on to further imply that the commons hindered the advance of civilization. Though these commons lands had survived in Britain since the Middle Ages, despite other social and agricultural developments, contributors to the Agricultural Reports classified the commons as an uncivilized institution. "So wild a country nurses up a race of people as wild as the fen; and thus the morals and eternal welfare of numbers are hazarded or ruined for want of an enclosure," alleged Young.<sup>62</sup> Young implied that wild lands created wild people. In addition, Young used the phrase "eternal welfare," for it was not just the physical welfare of the poor at stake, but the welfare of their eternal souls as well. Apparently God preferred wage laborers. Later in the same Report, Young claimed, "I know nothing better calculated to fill a country with barbarians ready for any mischief, than extensive commons."<sup>63</sup>

The British Empire at the time spread across the globe, bringing “civilization” to supposedly uncouth nations. Young and other writers equated cultivation with civilization and the commons with savagery. Pitt affirmed Young’s impeachment of the commons when he compared the poor who gathered resources from the common to “savages” before the Agricultural Revolution.<sup>64</sup> Basically, Young and Pitt believed that hunting, gathering, and free-range grazing were markers of a barbaric society, and they considered these to be an embarrassment to 19<sup>th</sup> century British sensibilities. With this argument, the Board of Agriculture compared the commons to the farthest reaches of the British Empire, denoting a dangerous other that necessarily must be enclosed lest it infect the purity of British civilization.

The crusade against the commons directed by the Board of Agriculture insisted that enclosure was necessary for the common good, even if a minority suffered. Thomas Rudge, author of *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Gloucester*, retorted, “If it could even be proved, that some cottagers were deprived of a few trifling advantages, yet the small losses of individuals ought not to stand in the way of certain improvements on a large scale.”<sup>65</sup> Rudge contested the validity of common rights, rejecting their importance in the face of the good of the kingdom. In his Report on Surrey, William Stevenson verified Rudge’s claims, “instances of temporary and individual distress among the poor,” reasoned Stevenson, “may be the result [of enclosure], but they must give way.”<sup>66</sup> Once again, the exigencies of the poor due to enclosure held little importance for the Board of Agriculture. The good of the nation, and more importantly, the good of landowners maintained highest priority. Middleton joined this conversation on the greater good as well. “It is very unreasonable that the nation should suffer from the obstinacy of persons of this cast, or disposition, who will neither cultivate the soil themselves, nor suffer others to do it,” whined Middleton.<sup>67</sup> For the greater good of the nation, commons must be enclosed, cultivation must expand, and common rights eradicated.

As advocates for the greater good, the authors of the Agricultural Reports invoked the aristocratic idea of *noblesse oblige*, urging society to adopt the plans of the Board of Agriculture for the good of society.<sup>68</sup> The productivity of the land, the morals of the poor, and the entirety of civilization, according to the Board of Agriculture, depended on commons enclosure. Charles Vancouver, author of *General View of the Agriculture of Hampshire*, proclaimed that it was “quite sufficient to justify the surveyor in an earnest wish...to see the day when every species of intercommonable and forest rights may be extinguished.”<sup>69</sup> In the name of the greater good of the kingdom, it was the aristocratic responsibility to terminate the commons. Young pleaded, “Nor is it in the view of productiveness alone, that such an enclosure is to be wished: the morals of the whole surrounding country demand it imperiously.”<sup>70</sup> As the Secretary to the Board of Agriculture, Young used the Agricultural Reports to publicize the Board, not as the destroyers of a feudal welfare system, but as the saviors of society.

The Board of Agriculture published the series of Agricultural Reports for the purpose of endorsing enclosure of the commons. Along the way, the Board condemned the commons as uncivilized and slandered the poor as criminals. The writers of Agricultural Reports frequently used the words idle, lazy, and indolent in their descriptions of the poor. Portrayed as the heroes of society in their texts, their actions identified the Board as hungry capitalists engaged in a class conflict. This type of thinking dominated the Agricultural and Industrial Revolution as the remaining wilds succumbed to the greater good. Before long, the rural poor, bereft of common right, migrated to cities to become the *residuum* of the Industrial Revolution. The air, water, and land polluted to satisfy the needs of industry.<sup>71</sup> Seemingly a lone voice of reason, George Skene Keith protested, “Let not the fastidious critic, however, consider these mountains as *mere wastes*. Nature produces nothing in vain; though we may not always see the use of her productions.”<sup>72</sup>

## 2. Acknowledgements

The author wishes to express her appreciation to Dr. Ellen Holmes Pearson and Dr. Bill Spellman at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, and to Dr. Gail Savage at St. Mary’s College of Maryland.



### 3. References

- 
- 1 John Middleton, *View of the Agriculture of Middlesex: With Observations on the Means of its Improvement*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: B. MacMillan, 1798), 384.
  - 2 J.M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure, and Social Change in England, 1700-1820*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993): 61-64.
  - 3 Leigh Shaw-Taylor, "Labourers, Cows, Common Rights and Parliamentary Enclosure: The Evidence of Contemporary Comment c. 1760-1810," *Past & Present*, No. 171 (May 2001): 95-126.
  - 4 Sara Birtles, "Common Land, Poor Relief and Enclosure: The Use of Manorial Resources in Fulfilling Parish Obligation: 1601-1854," *Past & Present*, No. 165 (Nov 1999): 74-106.
  - 5 Neeson, *Commoners*.
  - 6 Graham Rogers, "Custom and Common Right: Waste Land Enclosure and Social Change," *British Agricultural History Society*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (1993): 137-154.
  - 7 Robert Allen, *Enclosure and the Yeoman*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992).
  - 8 S. J. Thompson, "Parliamentary Enclosure, Property, Population, and the Decline of Classic Republicanism in Eighteenth-Century Britain," *Historical Journal*, Vol. 51 Issue 3 (Sep 2008): 621-642.
  - 9 Paul Carter, "Enclosure, Waged Labour and the Formation of Class Consciousness: Rural Middlesex c. 1700-1835," *Labour History Review*, Vol. 66 Issue 3 (Winter 2001): 269-293.
  - 10 J. L. and Barbara Hammond, *The Village Labourer 1760-1832: A Study in the Government of England Before the Reform Bill*. 4th ed. (London: Longman & Green, 1927), 37.
  - 11 Arthur Young, *On the Advantages Resulting from the Establishment of the Board of Agriculture: Being the Substance of a Lecture Read to that Institution, May 26, 1809*, (London: B. MacMillan, 1809), 11.
  - 12 Arthur Young (1741-1820) was an agricultural reformer and writer. His father, Arthur Young, was the chaplain of the speaker of the House of Commons, a religious influence that Young avoided early in life until his later radical conversion. Young travelled widely in Ireland, France, Spain, and Italy before becoming the Secretary of the Board of Agriculture, a position that established him as an agricultural writer. See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Edited by H.C.G. Mathew and Brian Harrison, Vol. 60 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 871-875.
  - 13 Young, *Advantages*, 14.
  - 14 Young, *Advantages*, 14.
  - 15 Arthur Young, *General View of the Agriculture of Oxfordshire*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1813), 91.
  - 16 Sir Henry Holland, *General View of the Agriculture of Cheshire*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: Richard Phillips, 1808), 87.
  - 17 St. J. Priest, *General View of the Agriculture of Buckinghamshire*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: R. Phillips, 1810), 353.
  - 18 Nathaniel Kent, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Norfolk: With Observations For its Means of Improvement*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: Norfolk Press, 1796), 79. Nathaniel Kent (1737-1810) was an agricultural advisor and writer who also wrote *Hints to Gentlemen of Landed Property*. See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Edited by H.C.G. Mathew and Brian Harrison, Vol. 31 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 83.
  - 19 Arthur Young, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Sussex*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: B. MacMillan, 1808), 454.
  - 20 John Boys, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Kent: With Observations on the Means of its Improvement*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: Colin Macrae, 1794), 147. John Boys (1749-1824) was a successful farmer and author of the County Report on Kent and *An Essay on Paring and Burning*, detailing how to deforest lands. His writing were translated and circulated in England as well as the continent. See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Edited by H.C.G. Mathew and Brian Harrison, Vol. 7 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 124.
  - 21 Clarke, *History of the Board of Agriculture*, 31.
  - 22 John Billingsley, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Somerset, With Observations on the Means of its Improvement*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (Bath: R. Cruttwell, 1795), 49.

- 
- 23 Sir Ernest Clarke, *History of the Board of Agriculture: 1793-1822*, Royal Agricultural Society of England (London: 13 Hanover Square, 1898) 31-32.
- 24 Adam Murray, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Warwick: With Observations on the Means of its Improvement*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: B. McMillan, 1813), 145.
- 25 Kent, *Norfolk*, 322-323.
- 26 Arthur Young, *General View of the Agriculture of Essex*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: B. McMillan, 1804), 152.
- 27 Richard Parkinson, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Rutland*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: Richard Phillips, 1808), 40. Richard Parkinson (1747-1815) was a farmer and the son of a farmer. Parkinson spent time in America as a guest of George Washington to advise on agricultural matters, after his return to Europe, Parkinson spent time advising in Ireland. See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Edited by H.C.G. Mathew and Brian Harrison, Vol. 42 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 801-802.
- 28 John Walter, "Bucklebury Enclosure Bill," *Hansard*, House of Commons Debate, May 8 1834, Vol. 23 cc. 748-53.
- 29 Boys, *Kent*, 61.
- 30 William Stevenson, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Surrey*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: Richard Phillips, 1809), 456.
- 31 John Holt, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Lancaster*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture. (London: Richard Phillips, 1795), 86.
- 32 Young, *Sussex*, 187.
- 33 Middleton, *Middlesex*: 456.
- 34 Holt, *Lancaster*, 47.
- 35 Holt, *Lancaster*, 103.
- 36 William Pitt, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Northampton*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: 1809), 34. William Pitt (1749-1823) was an Agricultural writer, not William Pitt the Elder of Younger. See *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Edited by H.C.G. Mathew and Brian Harrison, Vol. 44 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 470.
- 37 St. J. Priest, *Buckinghamshire*, 122.
- 38 Arthur Young, *General View of the Agriculture of Oxfordshire*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: Sherwood, Neely, and Jones, 1813), 91.
- 39 Young, *Oxfordshire*, 98.
- 40 Pitt, *Northampton*, 40.
- 41 Mavor, *Berkshire*, 75.
- 42 Billingsley, *Somerset*, 53.
- 43 Billingsley, *Somerset*, 102.
- 44 Arthur Young, *General View of the Agriculture of Lincolnshire*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: 1813), 445.
- 45 Arthur Young, *General View of the Agriculture of Hertfordshire*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: B. McMillan, 1804), 222.
- 46 Young, *Sussex*, 28.
- 47 Young, *Lincolnshire*, 458.
- 48 Kent, *Norfolk*, 158.
- 49 John Clark, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Radnor, With Observations on the Means of its Improvement*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: Colin Macrae, 1794), 16.
- 50 Young, *Lincolnshire*, 282.
- 51 Gooch, *Cambridge*, 69.
- 52 Middleton, *Middlesex*, 456.
- 53 Clark, *Radnor*, 25.
- 54 Middleton, *Middlesex*, 103.
- 55 Billingsley, *Somerset*, 52.
- 56 Billingsley, *Somerset*, 289.
- 57 Young, *Oxfordshire*, 239.
- 58 Mavor, *Berkshire*, 74.
- 59 Middleton, *Middlesex*, 273.
- 60 Holland, *Cheshire*, 106.

- 
- 61 Billingsley, *Somerset*, 52.
- 62 Young, *Lincolnshire*, 254.
- 63 Young, *Lincolnshire*, 488.
- 64 Pitt, *Northhampton*, 59-60.
- 65 Thomas Rudge, *General View of the Agriculture of the County of Gloucester*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: Richard Phillips, 1807), 251.
- 66 Stevenson, *Surrey*, 143.
- 67 Middleton, *Middlesex*, 105.
- 68 *Noblesse oblige* is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary as “Privilege entails responsibility.” Literally that nobility is obligated to serve society.
- 69 Charles Vancouver, *General View of the Agriculture of Hampshire, Including the Isle of Wight*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (London: Richard Phillips, 1810), 496.
- 70 Young, *Oxfordshire*, 239.
- 71 The Oxford English Dictionary defines residuum as “that which remains, a residue, a remainder.” In this context it denotes the class of people in Britain forgotten by society.
- 72 George Skene Keith, *A General View of the Agriculture of Aberdeenshire*, Great Britain Board of Agriculture (Aberdeen: D. Chalmers & Co., 1811), 389.